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ABSTRACT

This document summarizes the National Institute on the Assessment of Experiential Learning conference in July 1989, during which educators from the field of adult education met to discuss prior learning assessment (PLA), a process developed for awarding credit for college-level knowledge acquired outside the classroom. Some educators were exploring setting up a PLA program; others already had programs. Learning at the Institute occurred through lectures, discussions, simulations, role playing, games, and informal discussion. The topics presented at each session and the remarks of the principal speaker or discussion leader are summarized. The sessions and names of speakers or discussion leaders were: (1) "How Adults Learn through Experience" (P. Jacobs, L. Harvey, and S. Simosko); (2) "Identifying College-Level Learning" (U. Whitaker and H. W. Cabell); (3) "Documenting Learning" (U. Whitaker); (4) "Measuring Learning" (H. W. Cabell); (5) "Evaluating Learning" (S. Simosko); (6) "Selecting and Training Faculty Assessors" (L. S. Harvey and R. A. Craig); (7) "Marketing Prior Learning Assessment to Faculty, Administrators, and Potential Students" (R. A. Craig and S. Simosko); and (8) "Maintaining a Quality Program" (A. Mandell). (SLD)

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Proceedings of

THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON THE ASSESSMENT OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

JULY 16-20, 1989

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Topics

How Adults Learn Through Experience
Identifying College-Level Learning
Documenting Learning
Measuring Learning
Evaluating Learning
Selecting and Training Faculty Assessors
Marketing Prior Learning Assessment
    to Faculty, Administrators, and Potential Students
Maintaining a Quality Program

THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON THE ASSESSMENT OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

JULY 16-20, 1989

A Letter From The Director

In July 1989, over 100 adult educators met at the National Institute on the Assessment of Experiential Learning, sponsored by Thomas A. Edison State College in cooperation with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL).

Some participants attended to explore the possibility of beginning a Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) program on their campuses; others had a mandate to start a program and were looking for information to begin. Administrators who were already running programs came to discuss and share their ideas with the others. Also participating were faculty assessors working with PLA programs.

As with any group of adult learners, each participant came to the Institute with his or her experiences and learning styles, preferences and biases, and each left with a different learning experience. Some left to start a program at their home institutions; others, to make a good program even better.

The learning at the Institute occurred through a series of lectures, discussions, simulations, games, role-playing, a great deal of informal discussion, and a lot of fun. We hope this summary recaptures some of the spirit of the Institute and helps the reader learn more about Prior Learning Assessment.

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How Adults Learn Through Experience

Through lecture, lively discussions, role-playing, games and a great deal of fun, participants in the Institute were introduced to the topic "How Adults Learn Through Experience." The diverse approaches used by the presenters at times placed the participants in the role of the student, thereby increasing their awareness of the adult education principle that we learn through our experiences and that often people with the same set of experiences learn different things and at different levels. That is why assessing experiential learning is a process unique to each student and assessor.

During Dr. Paul Jacobs' session, participants played a game and were asked to try and figure out a strategy for always winning the game. Small groups came to varied conclusions and although some of them figured out the strategy, more importantly, during the game all learned about themselves as learners. What each participant learned from the same experience varied considerably. Broad-based theories such as "knowledge is power" were rediscovered; others personalized the conclusions and found out that they get anxious or competitive in such a situation. Because they were working in groups, skills such as communications and cooperation were necessary. One participant felt anxious because the games involved numbers, demonstrating that as adults we bring our specific anxieties to a learning situation.

Overall, the game demonstrated that even adults with exactly the same experience learn different things from that experience. Considering the variety of experiences that adults have each day, and each person's uniqueness, it is easy to see how the knowledge gained from the same experience is different for each learner.

In Dr. Leah Harvey's session, participants broke up into small groups to try and discover if there are general approaches to learning.

Groups identified a learning experience, what they learned, and how they learned it. The learning examples included such diverse topics as agriculture, religion, child psychology, alcoholism, and tournament bridge. In each example the learner was "need driven" to pursue the knowledge because of some personal issue in his or her life or problem that needed to be solved. The learning came out of personal need, a search for answers. Some of the ways that the learning occurred were through:

*reading
*family members, mentors, supervisors
*museums
*workshops
*teaching
*observations
*trial and error
*conversation, interaction

Regardless of the method of learning, the group discovered that in each case, when an adult learns outside the formal education process, it is because they need information.

How does experiential learning differ from classroom learning? The following chart gives some examples:

Experiential Learning	Classroom Learning
1. Starts with application, learning is for a special reason, to meet a need	1. Starts with theory
2. Self-paced, self-motivated	2. Instructor-paced, based on syllabus
3. Nonstructured (or structure is developed by the learner)	3. Structured
4. Based on need, desire	4. Might lack specific purpose for the individual student; could be a degree requirement
5. Situation specific	5. Broader view of the topic
6. More independence	6. More interaction (as with other students)
7. Less threatening, usually does not include evaluation	7. Can be threatening because there is usually an evaluation component

Because of these differences in learning methods, it is sometimes difficult for an assessor to place a college credit value on experiential learning. The knowledge gained through experience is often narrower or interdisciplinary. It does not easily break up into sub-units or credit hours. Dr. Harvey believes that it is the role of adult educators to help students get excited about the fuller learning experience and to provide information and structure to the learning. What portion of experiential learning is measurable? In the classroom, the content of a syllabus determines that the course is college-level. With experiential learning, it is a little more difficult to make that determination.

Dr. Harvey discussed standards and guidelines for awarding experiential learning credits that she encouraged participants to consider using in their programs. Credit should be given for the college-level learning that was achieved through an experience and a great deal of thought needs to go into determining what is college-level. Many times a learner's experiences are more narrow than is presented in a classroom and it is the job of the assessor to look for the balance between theory and practice. Dr. Harvey also believes that the assessor evaluating the knowledge should be working in the specific field that is being assessed and that the learning should be appropriate to the academic context. In other words, how does the learning fit in with the standard information in the field.

It is sometimes difficult for adults to identify and articulate what exactly they have learned. Often they have not been exposed to the vocabulary of a subject and therefore do not know how to describe their knowledge in academic terms. One of the steps in the assessment process is to help adults be able to see what they have learned in an academic context. A pitfall for adults who have become experts in their field is that they lose the ability to identify all the steps in a process they have come to do so easily; thus, they miss identifying all the knowledge needed to accomplish the job.

Documenting knowledge can take many forms and each college should have policies which define how the knowledge will be measured. Among the factors that need to be considered are the quantity of the evidence, timeframe of the learning, and the authenticity and quality of the documentation.

Assessors must see the documentation in the greater context of the learning that was involved. For example, a resume alone would not be sufficient documentation. Although a resume gives the assessor the bare facts, it does not indicate the person's competence in the work areas. It is up to the assessor to measure the learning and determine its breadth and depth for credit value.

Presenter Susan Simosko took the pragmatic approach to illustrating "How Adults Learn Through Experience." She engaged the group in an exercise to be able to analyze learning and identify some of its key features, explore ways to describe learning outcomes, and identify principles of good practice in helping adults identify their learning.

The group was to assume they were looking for a job in either the hotel industry or information technology field. They were asked to think about what they knew, when they learned it, why they learned it, how they learned it, and how the knowledge fit in with their overall education plan.

Simosko believes that a key role of adult educators is helping the learner make connections; that is, to identify knowledge and skills that are transferable from one field to another. She feels that there is a holistic body of learning that takes place that is greater than the sum of the parts. Learning occurs intentionally and unintentionally. It is hard to extract from people what they know and help them see the context of their learning.

Adults need to be taken through a process to help them receive credit for prior learning and this process needs to be identified within each institution interested in starting or improving its PLA program.

Through role-playing, participants observed a bookstore owner who wanted to become an editor and needed a college degree to meet the job requirements. He was seeking PLA credits for his work experience. During the role-playing, many key points were illustrated that are critical to a good PLA program:

*How a program recruits students is critical and the marketing of the program must be clear and accurate. Presenting the program as a quick and easy way to a college degree only sets up false expectations. A team

approach to marketing, which includes such people as the program director, communications professionals, and faculty and advisors is the best approach.

*Understanding the mindset of the adult student is a key element in helping them to succeed. This may be their first college experience or they may have been away from college for a long time. Even if they have completed coursework, the PLA program is a new experience and, as they see it, someone will be evaluating the "credit value" of their life's work.

*Advisors should be encouraging without setting up false expectations. While student/teacher relationships among young students are sometimes unequal or authoritative, adults should be treated equally and the interaction should be adult/adult. The advisor should help the student reflect on his or her life and ask probing questions. The advisor should also play a role in getting the student fired up, motivated.

*With the help of an advisor the student should develop and begin an action plan. He or she should leave the first meeting with an advisor knowing the next step.

*Every PLA program should provide materials for the student to take home after the initial appointment. The materials should state all the procedures of the PLA program in a clear and concise way, devoid of jargon. Reading the materials should assist students to determine their academic and career objectives and begin their educational planning. The materials should include:

*procedures, logistics
*timeframes
*costs
*academic programs of the college
*how degree relates to
job/career objectives
*educational planning tools
*accreditation information

Identifying College-Level Learning

Identifying college-level learning is the single most important ingredient for the successful evaluation of a learning experience. During the Institute, Urban Whitaker and Dr. Harriet W. Cabell discussed this topic with the group and introduced various methods being used to identify learning.

Whitaker stressed that assessors must look at the learning with two questions in mind: Is it college-level? If so, how much college credit is the learning worth? He pointed out that there is a difference between measurement and evaluation. Measurement has to do with the learner; evaluation has to do with the learning. Assessors are asked to measure the level of the learner's competence, then decide (evaluate) what the learning is worth in college credits.

In evaluating learning, assessors must keep in mind that they are accrediting learning, not experience. Within the learning experience there should be an appropriate balance of theory and application. According to Whitaker, traditional learning has often been criticized as placing too much emphasis on theory and not enough on practice. Often experiential learning is criticized for just the opposite.

To explore the various ways of identifying college-level learning, Whitaker had the participants break up into small groups to discuss five policies. Then the larger group discussed the pros and cons of each.

POLICY #1—Decisions about level of credit should only be made by full-time, tenured faculty.

Although the group agreed in concept with this statement, they felt that words such as "tenure" and "only" might be eliminated in some cases. Some felt that a recently retired faculty member or a member on leave could conduct an assessment. Others felt that part-time faculty could also do the job and, in fact, if they were working in the field to be assessed and teaching part-time, could bring a practical level of expertise to the assessment. When there was no faculty member with the expertise on campus, or if the faculty did not support the concept of PLA, members of the group felt that finding someone off-campus might be necessary, despite the political problems it may cause. All agreed, however, that the advantage of having full-time faculty doing the assessment is that they probably had the best understanding of the curriculum and what is considered college-level.

POLICY #2—Learning is creditable only if it is in our catalog.

Most of the group disagreed with this statement and felt that it was too restrictive. They preferred #3, which was:

POLICY #3—Learning is creditable if it is in the catalog of any accredited institution.

Even this statement was vague in some parts and the group discussed what "accredited" could mean to different people. They emphasized that the

preferred accreditation was by the six regional accrediting commissions. Courses which have been approved by the American Council on Education, for example, would also be acceptable to the group.

POLICY #4—It isn't college-level unless it has both theory and practice.

The group basically agreed with this statement but pointed out that the balance of theory and practice would vary depending on the subject.

POLICY #5—Decisions on level and credit should be made only by experts in the same discipline as the one in which credit is being sought.

Although the group mostly agreed with this statement, they disagreed with strong words like "only." In fact they went on to say that definitive words like "only," "never," and "most" might not belong in policies on PLA since each case has its own special set of circumstances.

Whitaker suggested that perhaps two experts are required to assess prior learning: an expert in the subject matter (to measure the amount of learning) and an expert in the academic process (to evaluate what the learning is worth in college credits). Using two experts would be especially appropriate when it is difficult to find an academic expert in the subject to be assessed.

A quick way to find out how students learn best is to ask them about a specific skill they have learned and are proud of and then ask them how they learned it. There are, however, more sophisticated ways to identify learning styles and Dr. Cabell shared two specific ways she uses at the University of Alabama.

Most adults have a pattern for the way they approach learning and understanding that pattern will help them discover how they process information. Dr. Cabell illustrated this point by introducing the group to the Learning Styles Inventory (LSI) designed by David Kolb. By answering a series of questions, participants were able to categorize themselves as to how they process information.

For example, one of the four possible categories is "accommodator." Strengths of accommodators are that they are risk-takers, carry out plans, are involved, adaptive. They also tend to solve problems by trial and error. For this category and the other three (assimilator, diverger, converger), discussion followed about how the specific characteristics of a group would affect their learning styles.

According to Dr. Cabell, most adult learners process information using concrete examples. Since most faculty process information using theories, it creates a natural tension between the groups. For example, if a faculty member and an adult student were asked to find out about the hotel industry, they would approach the learning assignment very differently. A faculty member might read and research the subject; an adult student might visit hotels and talk to people. This example was used to illustrate that we all have a preferred method of learning and processing information. Adult educators who recognize this fact will be more effective when advising adults in PLA.

The portfolio process at the University of Alabama begins with students taking the LSI. Then they reflect on how they process information. Once these steps are complete, students develop a "significant learning outline." This outline charts their work, education, volunteer and recreational activities, military experience, licenses and awards received, and publications. Students are asked to reflect on the time spent in these activities, what the activities involved, learning outcomes and competencies reached, and ways that the learning could be documented. The group at the Institute was asked to complete the outline to get a sense of what the student experiences when going through the process.

As adults learn how they process information, they can use that knowledge to help guide them in putting a portfolio together or selecting other methods of earning college credit, such as examinations.

Documenting Learning

In order for an assessor to accurately measure the learning of a student, documentation of that learning is necessary. What constitutes "acceptable" documentation varies in PLA programs across the country and during Urban Whitaker's session on "Documenting Learning" the group analyzed five policies. Each policy was rated, with 0 meaning "no value" and 10 being excellent.

Policy #1—When a test (local or national) is available to cover the subject being assessed, the test should be the primary means of documentation.

Most groups rated this policy in the middle of the range. Provided that care was taken to be sure the test really measured the objectives of the course, tests were viewed as a quicker way to earn credits than preparing a portfolio. However, since tests can be threatening to some students, it was felt that there should always be another method available for students to document their learning.

Policy #2—Courses completed at nonaccredited institutions or in noncollegiate settings should not be acceptable as documentation in support of a PLA claim.

This was the least favorable policy with the group; six of the eight subgroups rating it a "0." The term "nonaccredited" was questioned as being too vague. In some cases, depending upon where the courses were completed, it was felt that the learning could be part of a PLA claim for credit. Whitaker felt that although a program taught in a nonaccredited setting should not be accepted without checking into the content, it should be considered, since excellent learning can go on outside accredited colleges.

Policy #3—Documentation alone should never be accepted as the sole evidence of learning. There should always be at least one fairly extensive one-on-one interview of the learner by a competent assessor.

The group disagreed with each other on this policy, with scores ranging from 0 to 10. Some felt that wording like "always" was too strong and "extensive" was too ambiguous. They felt that an interview might not always be necessary. Others felt that the faculty assessor and the student should both have the option to request a one-on-one interview. Students may feel it is to their advantage to be interviewed if they did not have enough documentation and felt an interview would help them communicate their knowledge. A disadvantage of this policy from an institutional point of view is that it is very labor intensive.

Policy #4—A formal portfolio course is the most effective and reliable way to gather and prepare documentation for PLA. A portfolio course must be completed before credit is awarded.

The group rated this policy from 0 to 6 with many rating it at 5. Most did not think students should be required to attend a course to get credit although some felt that a workshop would help students reflect on their experiences. Faculty involvement at the workshop was suggested.

Policy #5—The learner's own self-assessment of learning level achieved should not be considered as legitimate documentation.

Most felt that the learner's self-assessment was part of the process but that the assessment should be supported by other documentation. It was the experience of the group that while some students exaggerate their experience, often students minimize their abilities and underestimate what they know. Whitaker emphasized that although it is important to get student input, award of credit is the decision of the faculty member.

Measuring Learning

Before beginning the topic "measuring learning," Dr. Cabell discussed questions that arose from the group as they filled out the "Significant Learning Outline" discussed under the previous topic, "Identifying College-level Learning." The group agreed that analyzing the learning achieved is the most difficult part of a portfolio. Questions were raised about how to document theory versus learning; how to document "experience" and what kind of documentation would be required; how to accept practical experience without theory; and simply put, how you show what you know. Proving what you know is also difficult as well as deciding how much documentation is necessary.

Dr. Cabell believes that students get energized by developing a portfolio and it makes them want to go on and learn more. She warned about the dangers of over documentation and reminded the group that the documents are not as important as it is for students to be able to articulate what they know.

Dr. Cabell had several suggestions for faculty on how to measure learning, that is, how to determine the degree and level of competency achieved:

***Fit the assessment method to the learning activity.** For example, to evaluate a teacher's aide, Dr. Cabell suggested that the assessor develop a list of competencies he or she feels is necessary for the job and then go and observe the student doing the work; in other words, an assessor should watch the performance.

***Fit the assessment method to the learner.** An assessor needs to build on a learner's strengths. If the learner is a poor writer, there may be another way for him or her to provide documentation.

***The assessment is an important part of the learning process.** As the portfolio is being developed an assessor may see strengths and weaknesses in the student's understanding of the subject and request that he or she do additional reading or have discussions. This adds to the student's knowledge and rounds it out.

***Ensure the reliability of the assessment.** It is important that directors of PLA programs act as advocates for the student. They need to find assessors that are reliable. Also, they need to develop a system that protects the student from any assessors that are unfair or unreliable.

***Faculty assessors must measure only the course subject for which they were hired.** In Dr. Cabell's experience, occasionally faculty members comment on the possible credit-worthiness of a portfolio in a field other than the one in which they have been asked to do the assessment. It is important that each faculty assessor evaluate only his or her field of expertise.

***Assessors need to be trained** in the theory and practices of PLA.

***Results of an assessment need to be stated objectively.**

***Students should be encouraged to assess themselves and what they know.**

In summary, Dr. Cabell felt that most portfolios should include a resume, description of where the learning took place, an analysis of the learning outcomes (which she considers the hardest part), a bibliography that demonstrates an understanding of the field, documentation (if appropriate), and suggestions for evaluators.

It is the responsibility of the PLA program administrators to advise the student on privacy issues if the portfolio is of a sensitive nature, to make recommendations for what the student should do next to add to their experience base, to transcribe the learning so it is a fair record of what the student has learned, and to act as the student's advocate. Dr. Cabell discouraged institutions from awarding block credits. It makes it difficult to help the student build on the portfolio because credits are not broken down and the student cannot see the next step.

Evaluating Learning

There are several steps that must be taken in order for an assessor to accurately evaluate prior learning. Regardless of the subject, an assessor is measuring a student's knowledge against a standard, so it is essential that the standard be set and clearly defined. Then, the evidence must be examined for reliability, validity, and sufficiency.

During Susan Simosko's session on "Evaluating Learning" she set out to meet the following objectives: identify the key components of a competency-based system, address standard-setting issues, consider issues of assessment, evaluate an example of student learning, and identify specific faculty training needs.

Although there are several definitions of a "competency-based" system, Simosko suggested a definition which comes from the ability to do work to a standard expected in the actual work environment. In the context of identifying standards, Simosko defined a competent person as one who can "perform effectively a particular function in a diversity of settings over an extended period of time and can respond effectively to irregular occurrences in environments having different characteristics."

Standards of performance must be set whether they apply to a training situation or an educational institution. In the prior learning assessment process, the standard must be understood by all involved. Simosko demonstrated just how critical it is for students to understand what is expected of them, that is, what standard has been set, with a simple standard-setting exercise.

Three members of the group were asked to leave the room and then came back one at a time. When the first returned, he was asked simply to clap his hands. The second person was shown a list of words that the group had discussed related to clapping, and then he was asked to clap. The words were rhythm, volume, duration, and artistic expression. The third person was shown the four words but also was told that the group had set standards about the rhythm, volume, duration, and artistic expression by which the person would be evaluated. For example, the volume should be loud and the duration 10 seconds. The third participant did the best, serving to illustrate the point that in PLA, the more information the student has about what standard is expected, the better chance he or she has of meeting that standard.

In catalogs on PLA, expectations need to be spelled out. Simosko stated that course descriptions are not the same as standards. For example, an American History course description may list topics, but generally will not go into detail about expectations. This puts a great deal of responsibility on the assessors to determine what the standards should be for an acceptable portfolio.

During an assessment, a student is measured against a standard and evidence is used to derive information about what the student knows. Inferences are drawn from the evidence. Simosko believes that one of the most difficult concepts to grasp about PLA is that the assessment is based on "outcomes" of what a person would be expected to know once he or she had

completed a course, and yet the PLA is not related to time, place, or methods by which the learning occurred.

Evidence can be direct or indirect. In most cases, no single form of evidence is sufficient to complete a prior learning assessment. Examples of direct evidence are based on teaching and learning in a classroom and include testing, essays, oral examinations, attendance, assignments, research papers, and project work, to name a few. Indirect evidence includes letters about the student, apprenticeships, licenses, certificates, newspaper articles about the student, and commendations. Simosko believes that performance appraisals can be used as indirect evidence. Job descriptions cannot, since a job description does not indicate performance.

Issues to consider during assessment are validity, reliability, and cost-effectiveness. Validity means that the evidence measures what is intended to be measured. For example, to obtain a driver's license, written and performance tests are required. Someone could pass the written examination and still not be able to drive. Both parts of the examination are necessary for the test to be valid.

Assessors or program directors must also be assured of the reliability of the evidence and the assessment must be conducted in a cost-effective way. Cost-effectiveness must be considered when a decision is made as to how the assessment will be performed. For example, a test might be the most cost-effective way to obtain the evidence in one case, but in another, it may be more efficient to observe the student in a work environment. Timing, travel, the nature of the skill, and the number of students involved are all considerations.

To assure the validity of all assessments, faculty training should be conducted regularly. Among the issues to be discussed with faculty are: the concept of PLA, assessment techniques, learning and assessment theory knowledge, how to develop outcomes, and the development of the portfolio itself.

Selecting and Training Faculty Assessors

Since faculty assessors are at the heart of every PLA program, selecting and training them is an ongoing process that is critical to the program's success. Dr. Leah S. Harvey and Dr. Ross Ann Craig discussed the various approaches to selecting and training faculty.

Dr. Harvey feels that assessors play three primary roles in the PLA program: mentoring and helping students design and pursue learning and assessment objectives; making judgements about the character and level of learning; and determining the value of the learning in credits. She focused her session on the last two roles.

The group created a list of criteria that they felt was important in selecting assessors. Everyone felt that it was very important for the assessor to believe philosophically in the PLA approach. Other characteristics were: expertise in subject matter, reputation, professional experience, research and publications, teaching, and respect from academic colleagues. The group agreed that in general it would be better to use faculty from their home institutions who had a knowledge of the institution and its standards.

Once faculty have been selected, ongoing training is necessary to maintain the program's standards. To develop a model training program participants broke into small groups. In each group someone role-played a PLA program director, faculty member, and second-level administrator concerned with resources and money.

The group was asked to consider:
*desired outcomes of training
*timeframe, number of sessions
*time between training sessions
*selection of facilitators; qualifications of facilitators
*structure of the training; for example, role-playing, lecture, etc.
*resources needed by faculty
*pay

In discussing learning outcomes, Dr. Harvey and the group felt that after participating in the training, faculty assessors should understand the concept and context of assessment, the different assessment tools available and which tools to select in different cases, how PLA fits into higher education in general, accreditation standards, what college-level is and how they will be expected to communicate the results of their evaluations.

Most groups felt that the initial training should last two or three hours and then there should be follow-up sessions. It was felt that the facilitator should be a faculty member, but that the logistics for the training were the responsibility of the PLA director. Using a "student all-star" who had succeeded at PLA as part of the training was also suggested.

During the training, faculty assessors should be able to see sample portfolios to help them understand what is expected. There should also be an understanding of what kinds of materials students are going to be asked to

submit as evidence. Role-playing was also suggested to enhance the training, and in fact having each assessor go through the assessment process was also recommended.

Once the initial training session was completed, on-going training could include debriefings after an assessment and regular meetings to problem solve. Providing the assessor with a handbook and all materials developed for the program was also considered essential.

During Dr. Ross Ann Craig's session, the group also discussed the characteristics of the ideal faculty assessor. Although many qualities were discussed, the group agreed that the most important qualities were:

*Belief in the theory that learning can occur outside the classroom and can be assessed
*Ability to transfer academic to practice, that is, decide how many credits the learning is worth
*Substantial knowledge of the field to be assessed
*Previous exposure to adults in the classroom
*Reliability and a professional attitude

Dr. Craig said that in her experience working with other groups, the two characteristics of a good assessor that were mentioned most often were good judgement and an excellent background in the subject area. Other characteristics mentioned were objectivity, an excellent reputation among colleagues on campus, lack of bias, devotion to learning, patience and the ability to follow directions.

In starting a PLA program, the selection of the first group of assessors is very important because many times the reputation of the entire program depends upon the first faculty who get involved. It is important to include the opinion of faculty when selecting assessors. Early in the program, directors must work to dispel the myth that "the assessment people are giving away credits" or are "picking faculty that will do what the assessment people want."

How does the PLA director attract quality faculty assessors to the program? According to Dr. Craig, once it has been decided what kind of person is needed, directors should spread the word and develop a system to access desired individuals.

It is up to the PLA director to encourage "model" assessors to participate, and to find ways to make the program appeal to them. Divising rewards of one kind or another are important and will be available depending upon how committed a particular institution is to the program. Rewards can be the satisfaction of working with adults, monetary rewards, awards and recognition days and other "ego-builders." Research opportunities might also attract faculty.

When training assessors, Dr. Craig emphasized the need for PLA directors to understand what methods of training have worked in their institution and be

sure that modes of delivery are based on those methods and the individual institutional environment. She recommended moving from the overall philosophy of the program to the details. Background material should include adult learning philosophy, which can be available through handouts, video or discussion. Directors are obligated to provide the details of the program to the assessors and procedures need to be discussed and made clear. Standard conditions should be stressed with the understanding that exceptions will occur.

The PLA director should also identify institutional liaisons and advocates of the program and assessors should know where to discuss any philosophical or procedural questions.

Although Dr. Craig believes that PLA directors should be involved in some aspects of the training, she recommends using experts with good teaching skills. Identifying institutional advocates and using them in some visible way during the training was also advised. Advocates with good reputations within the institution can lend credibility to a new program.

Dr. Craig also recommended using well constructed case studies during the training. Role-playing with mock students that have been successful and unsuccessful at PLA will give assessors a sense of the real work involved and alert them to some of the pitfalls in assessing prior learning. Finally, Dr. Craig emphasized the need to get faculty to evaluate the program and make immediate suggestions for improvement.

Marketing Prior Learning Assessment to Faculty, Administrators, and Potential Students

Before a PLA director develops an external marketing plan to attract students, it will be necessary to internally market the new program among faculty and administrators. Getting their support and participation and having the program in place is critical before any external marketing should occur.

To begin thinking about marketing issues, Dr. Craig had the group fill out Institutional Profile Sheets. Among the questions covered in the profile were location of the institution, demographics of the area, the institution's mission, its image in the community and its major strengths. She also asked them to rate their institution on its innovative qualities.

Dr. Craig feels that it is very important to sort through the profile looking for barriers and strengths that may affect the PLA initiative. A supportive, innovative administration was seen as a strength. Examples of weaknesses were an institution in which innovation is low, people are happy with the "status quo" or the inertia is so evident that it is difficult to get a decision made to move resources. If PLA is not compatible with the institution's mission or if survival issues (such as innovation to increase enrollment) are not on the institutional agenda, internally marketing PLA will be more difficult.

In promoting PLA internally, Dr. Craig advises directors to select language that the institution will hear, such as "marketing" or "enrollment management." The PLA director must also decide who is going to be the spokesperson to start introducing the concept. She advises finding the most powerful person possible, someone respected on campus, and then equipping that person with all the necessary information.

Dr. Craig had several suggestions on ways to address the opposition:

***Use experts.** Educators as a group respect experts and will respond positively to them. Experts can be used in group presentations, forums, and newsletters, for example.

***Use internal resources.** Discover outstanding adult educators and people who are well respected and believe in what you are doing within your institution.

***Use printed or video materials.** Establish a center or request space within a library for materials that support and explain the PLA concept.

***Take people to successful PLA sites or to conferences.** Depending on budget and logistics, broaden people's perspectives on the topic by having them visit successful PLA programs or attend conferences. Bringing speakers on campus is also a good idea.

***Expose them to students who have been successful in PLA.** This is a particulary powerful tool. An articulate, outstanding student could demonstrate PLA's value.

***Involve them in organizations that promote PLA.** Use national organizations for support and consultation.

***Demonstrate the need for PLA through customer demand.**

While promoting PLA internally it is inevitable that some misconceptions and concerns will arise. By anticipating as many of these as possible, the PLA director can address them selectively to dispel the myths and fears. It may also be possible to develop a selling point around the facts which dispel the myth and use the positive information in developing the marketing plan to promote the program.

Different roadblocks may occur in different organizations and Dr. Craig advises PLA directors not to create problems by addressing myths before they surface. Examples of myths that might surface are: credit for prior learning depresses enrollments, only full-time faculty on regular appointments are qualified to deliver credit awards, and incompetent assessment and evaluations often take place.

Dr. Craig believes that a PLA program should never be marketed externally until everything is in place within the institution. A program that attempts to start working with students before it is ready will not be smooth and word of problems will spread quickly, hurting the reputation of the program.

Before spending any money promoting the PLA program, the following questions should be answered:

*Whom do you want to reach?
*Where are these individuals located?
*How do they generally get information?
*Who will be in charge of marketing efforts?
*What budgeting allowances will be made for those efforts?
*What goals are set for participation in PLA?

Depending on budget, Dr. Craig advises the use of market research and focus groups if possible. Trying to determine which media would best reach the targeted group is difficult and the best way would be to ask potential students. Possibilities are limitless and may include newspapers, radio, television, magazines, bulletin boards, talk shows, strategically placed flyers or special events.

During Susan Simosko's session on marketing she outlined several questions which she feels must be answered before external marketing can begin:

*Why offer the service? Is it linked to the mission of the institution?
*Who is to benefit? (What specific groups?)
*Who is to pay?
*Who are potential students?
*What are past or present strategies?
*Are there political or fiscal constraints?
*How can employee linkages be created?
*What is to be said about the program? (policies, procedures, services, expectations)
*Who says what? Who does what? How are spokespersons trained?
*Who will be marketed to? (individuals, parents, employers)

Simosko believes that having a mission statement that is supportive of PLA is critical. Depending on resources and commitment, one way to get started is through developing a pilot program. Starting small with two or three departments that are committed to the concept is a good idea. Program details can be worked out and the success can be built upon and spread.

Working with employers was emphasized during Simosko's presentation. She recommended making a list of employers who might be interested and prioritizing them by looking at factors that indicate their interest in employee education and training. Policies on tuition reimbursement, leave for education, internal training, and who gets to participate in training are indications of commitment. Sub-groups within companies may be targeted because they are in dead-end jobs or because of potential layoffs, for example.

Approaching the company can be done in several ways but Simosko emphasized the need for informal networking and creating opportunities to meet key decision-makers in places outside of the work location. Joining the local Chamber of Commerce or other associations where decision-makers participate is one idea. Other possibilities include sponsoring breakfasts on a topic that would interest the group you want to reach, offering the college's facilities for meetings, or creating a speaker's bureau involving faculty in the business areas. In most cases the person that will need to be reached is in the training and development area of the company, but the higher up in an organization you can reach, the better. Perhaps adjunct faculty work full-time in a company you are trying to approach.

Another decision to be made is who will be the spokesperson (salesperson) for the program. Again, the more clout the person has, the better, and the selection of a spokeperson may change depending on the specific company being approached and who has knowledge of the field or contacts within the company. Use of alumni (hopefully, well-placed in the organization) is an excellent idea.

Once you are "in the door" of an organization one of the first questions that may be asked is "How will my company benefit from participation?" The spokesperson should be prepared with answers that include improving the bottom line, since most companies are in the business of making money. Possible answers may include: employee satisfaction on the job will lead to better productivity, training people to be more flexible makes them more valuable employees, or that employers may save money in their tuition reimbursement budget if they participate. Depending on the nature of the company, many answers to that question can be found and Simosko recommends brainstorming with public relations staff and others in the college to come up with more ideas.

Brainstorming can also help to identify groups that may benefit from PLA and during the presentation participants took time to brainstorm.

Examples of potential markets included:

*Adults with two-year degrees who may want to continue their education.
*Employees on a job who do not have degrees but will need to earn a college degree for promotion or new certification.
*Returning women who may have developed skills in the home that are transferable to PLA.

The group also listed ways to reach groups that may benefit from PLA. This list included:

*educational opportunity centers
*English as a Second Language programs
*social service organizations
*churches
*women's groups
*adult basic education programs

Word-of-mouth was seen as the most successful way of reaching potential students, since many adults who are successful at PLA go back to the workplace or community and spread the word. Other ways of reaching potential students are through posters, newspapers and magazines, radio and television, billboards, booths at malls, direct mail and telemarketing. Simosko advises linking the PLA program to other college programs for marketing purposes. In many cases, an overall institutional advertising budget or evening or continuing education program budget includes PLA monies.

Who pays for PLA credits? Most times it is the individual. Depending upon policies within a company, PLA credits may or may not be included in tuition reimbursement programs. Educating the employer may be necessary to have a policy changed to include PLA coverage. Finding other sources of financial assistance may lead to groups of adults participating and could help PLA directors in recruiting students. (For example, state agencies, grants to help the disenfrancised, or unions.)

Maintaining a Quality Program

Although the issue of quality was either an implicit or explicit component of most of the Institute's sessions, Dr. Alan Mandell focused directly on the subject in his session on "Maintaining a Quality Program." The quality issue exists in every PLA program, whether the program is new or "experimental." Colleagues may be suspicious, cynical, or philosphically opposed to the practice whether PLA is just being introduced or well established within the institution. In the latter example, there may be a less immediate need for defensiveness, but the question of quality is raised as faculty and administrators accept PLA as a meaningful and serious effort to rethink what is meant by knowledge and skills, and how an undergraduate's "learning" is defined and evaluated.

Dr. Mandell believes that the issues associated with maintaining a quality PLA program should have the same status as any other efforts within an institution to insure that what a college does, how it is done, and what outcomes are expected are regularly explored. Dr. Mandell feels that quality control is a part of any ongoing reflective aspect of academic/institutional life and colleges need to explore whether what they are doing makes sense, if they can agree on what is fair and responsive to administrative, faculty and student interest, and whether college practices are providing a significant opportunity for students to earn an undergraduate degree that is consistent with their assumptions about what is a "good" education.

For the most up-to-date details and description of the quality issue, Dr. Mandell referred institute participants to Urban Whitaker's book Assessing Learning -- Standards, Principles, and Procedures, available through the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). The book includes a list of ten standards for quality assurance in assessing learning for credit.

During the Institute participants spent time as a group identifying areas of PLA where the issue of quality was important. Among the questions considered were: Where in the program would questions of quality arise? What problems would have to be confronted? What practices would have to be maintained and evaluated/reevaluated?

Once a common list of problems was identified, the group was split and given their assignments. Acting as PLA ethics committees, the two groups named, analyzed, debated, and set standards for assessment. After meeting separately to discuss the issue and develop an approach to maintaining the quality of their PLA program, the larger group met again to discuss their different attitudes, options and potential approaches.

The group felt that quality issues were relevant in the following PLA areas:

- ***Authenticity of a portfolio.** Making sure that the portfolio is done by the student.
- ***Authenticity of supporting documents.** Making sure that the documentation supporting a portfolio is an accurate and formal institutional document.
- ***Maintaining faculty interest and concern.** The PLA program should provide regular faculty development discussions that keep faculty aware of key issues in PLA, motivate them to see its academic viability, and

allow them to deal with ongoing questions and problems that arise.

***Quality of internal faculty evaluations and reliability (consistency) of credit recommendations among evaluators and over time.**

***Competence/ethicality of PLA staff and ethicality of public perception/information.** These points might include such diverse factors as the speed of service to the student or how accurately the program is portrayed through its marketing and advertising, either through publications or word-of-mouth.

***Objectivity of the evaluator.**

***Perception of others/reputation of the PLA program.**

***Adherence to rules/the issue of exceptions.** Do students have the opportunity to appeal and be heard?

***Financial pressures as they relate to recruiting, and the quality and vulnerability of the program.** Fear that the program may be cut because of low participation or the setting of student quotos could affect the quality.

***Faculty responsibilities.** Are they defined? What are acceptable time-frames for evaluating a portfolio? Is there a "culture of expectations" or are procedures written down.

***Support mechanisms for students.** Counseling should be available and students should have access to clearly written materials.

***Cross-evaluation, or single or multiple evaluations.** The group discussed the pros and cons of having more than one faculty member look at a portfolio. They also discussed a "stage" process whereby evaluations are done by an evaluator and then a cluster of evaluations are looked at as a whole by someone else to check for consistency.

***Question of duplication.** Is there a system in place to review for duplication of credit? What does the "prior" mean in PLA? Is there a point where a student can no longer apply for PLA?

***Does the applicability of PLA vary depending on the specific program or degree?**

Summary

Many colleges and universities nationwide now award credit for college-level knowledge acquired outside the classroom. Practices and procedures for doing so differ widely from college to college, and during the intensive, five-day Institute, educators from around the country were given the opportunity to discuss and debate the issues surrounding prior learning assessment.

Whether participants were exploring the idea of starting a PLA program or already had a PLA program operating at their home institution, at the Institute they were exposed to the best in the field. The Institute provided for one-on-one discussion with experts and colleagues alike. It was a unique opportunity to learn and share ideas on the many aspects of the growing field of prior learning assessment.

FACULTY OF THE INSTITUTE

Debra A. Dagavarian, Director of the Institute

Dr. Debra A. Dagavarian is the Director of Prior Learning Assessment at Thomas A. Edison State College. Throughout her fourteen years in higher education, she has developed a strong commitment to serving the adult learner. Formerly Assistant Dean for Assessment at Empire State College, she also has been Director of Evening programs and Director of Academic Advising at Mercy College. She holds a Doctorate in Education from Rutgers University, and currently is entering her eleventh year on the faculty of Mercy College. Among Dr. Dagavarian's publications is a book on children's baseball fiction.

Harriet W. Cabell

Dr. Harriet W. Cabell is the Associate Dean and Director of New College/External Degree Program, the University of Alabama. Speaker, trainer, educator, and consultant, she has conducted programs nationwide and abroad for over 60 colleges, universities, and professional organizations. Her training sessions focus on relevant, practical skills and techniques in a variety of areas including the philosophy and implication of prior learning programs, curricular issues, and the management of adult learning programs. Dr. Cabell is certified as an Educational Specialist, and holds a Doctoral degree from the University of Alabama.

Ross Ann Craig

Dr. Ross Ann Craig is the Vice President for Student Development at Delaware County Community College. She has developed and conducted a variety of workshops in adult development and assertiveness, and is a certified trainer in the Student Potential Program of CAEL. She has trained assessors working with students in the U.S. and Great Britain, and presented papers to a number of national and local professional groups, including the American Personnel and Guidance Association. Dr. Craig holds a Master's degree in Education from the University of Florida, a Doctoral degree in Education from Nova University, and is a licensed psychologist.

Leah S. Harvey

Dr. Leah Harvey, Dean of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment at Metropolitan State University, is an educator and consultant. In her ten years as a faculty member, she has been teaching, advising, and assessing learning for adult students, and conducting training programs for faculty. She has given papers and presentations on adult education, particularly on the assessment of learning, and is noted for her work in extracting the theoretical from practical learning. Dr. Harvey holds a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology with an emphasis in tests and measurements.

Paul I. Jacobs

Dr. Paul I. Jacobs, Director of Test Development and Research at Thomas A. Edison State College, has been involved for fourteen years in helping adult students demonstrate what they have learned through out-of-school experiences. He has organized and conducted numerous workshops, produced and edited written materials on behalf of CAEL, and served on a CAEL team to train educators in Quebec. He has organized workshops on math anxiety, thinking skills, problem-solving, and creativity. Dr. Jacobs has served as an educational consultant to the governments of India and Israel, and has been invited to testify before the state legislatures of NY, NJ, and MA.

Alan Mandell

Dr. Alan Mandell is currently Acting Associate Dean at Empire State College, State University of New York, in Hartsdale. Over the last dozen years as a faculty member, he has worked with adult students in the social sciences and history. He has written about educational theory and policy, and is the co-author, with Elana Michelson, of the CAEL publication, *Approaches to Portfolio Development*. Dr. Mandell also edits the journal of social-cultural criticism, *Kairos*. He holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from the City University of New York.

Paula Hooper Mayhew

Dr. Paula Hooper Mayhew is Associate Director of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. A former academic dean at Empire State College, she currently serves the Commission as the assessment and evaluation specialist for four-year colleges and research universities. A graduate of Barnard College, Columbia University, she received her Ph.D. in English Literature from Princeton University, where she completed a dissertation on narrative theory. She is co-author of a study on the women's college in the 1970s and has published articles in the field of women's studies administration and women's literature.

Susan Simosko

Susan Simosko, author of *Earn College Credit for What You Know* and author and editor of *Assessing Learning: A CAEL Handbook for Faculty*, is a private consultant in education and training currently based in Sheffield, England. Before moving to the UK, she had been National Network Coordinator for CAEL. She also has been Director of Testing and Assessment at Thomas A. Edison State College and Associate Director of the CLEP program at ETS. She currently is working under contract to the National Council for Vocational Qualifications, the Open University, the Scottish Council for Vocational Education, Metropolitan State University, and other organizations and institutions.

Urban Whitaker

Urban Whitaker has long been involved in experiential learning and career development. He has served as practitioner, teacher, and administrator in cooperative education and other experiential learning programs at San Francisco State University since 1969. He has developed materials in a number of media (print, tape, slide, software) on the learning and assessment of career-transferable skills, and is the author of *Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles and Procedures*. He has consulted for numerous colleges, and has performed multiple roles for CAEL: author, member of the Board of Directors, Regional Manager, presenter.